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Taking My Dad Fishing

Howard Schaap

He first knew nothing, or next to nothing, making his first pole from a broomstick, God knows what line, a cast off crank for a reel, shared tackle among friends. A Saturday afternoon lark tottering among the shore-strewn rocks, cursing and pushing and skipping stones, only half an eye on the tilting bobber, the tug of the line, spoke freedom from the land's hardtack diffidence of everyday farming, from the diligence of feeding and bedding animals day and night. To sneak away and nab a fish or two fed by the invisible supply and demand of the lake's hidden bounty was to witness grace, and so he bought a pole and learned to tie a knot or two and bought lures like assorted candies from the store, like Christmas tree ornaments.

When I came along, Saturday afternoons tottering among the rocks became ritual. There were covered reels on plastic painted rods, a floating minnow bucket with spring loaded mouth, a tackle box with lures in parallel compartments like an entire candy section. There were admonitions— “give it line” or “tighten your slack,” but never “pay attention” or “why won’t you sit still? As devotee, I organized the candy, cleaned the dirty grooves of the tackle box, scoured the sacred pages of *In-Fishermen* to learn new secrets from between the full color photos of entire stringers of shimmering fish like Spanish gold. Taking home any bounty—crappies like silver coin, a long pike, the spangled walleye—sealed the apprenticeship, lapsed into friendship.

But now is a new stage, the most difficult. The apprentice outstrips the master. He totters on flat land, much less on the happenstance rocks laid by WPA workers to draw in crappies. His fingers, always fat-strong from milking the tidal cows day and night, now fumble and shake the fine line impossibly. Do I take him down steep hills and bumpy paths to the coves where I know the great fish go to place their eggs, to snatch easy meals. Do I tie his line, admonish him to tighten his line, to set the hook.